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LINCOLNSHIRE — Hundreds of miles from a Mississippi courtroom where a suspect pleaded innocent Friday to the 40-year-old slayings of three civil rights workers, three Adlai Stevenson High School students were getting accolades for their role in publicizing the case.

Students Sarah Siegel, Allison Nichols and Brittany Saltiel spent more than a year working on a 2004 documentary *We Are Not Afraid* about the killings.

Their project included a rare phone interview with the man arrested Thursday, reputed Ku Klux Klan member 80-year-old Edgar Ray Killen, and helped generate a congressional resolution in June asking federal prosecutors to reopen the case.

"I was really happy for all the families who I knew had been waiting for this for 40 years," Siegel said Friday of Killen's arrest. "It was also a little saddening to know that it took 40 years for justice to start working."

The girls and their teacher, Barry Bradford, are humble about their part in renewing interest in the case, which was the subject of the 1988 movie *Mississippi Burning*.

But congressmen, including Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia Democrat and civil rights activist who knew the slain workers, credit the students for working to keep the case in the spotlight and unearthing new details.

Said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, who co-sponsored the congressional resolution: "There is no time limit on justice and justice is finally coming to Mississippi. This is a cold, dark chapter in American history and it is important we bring those responsible to justice."

Kirk said Friday he plans on recognizing the students' accomplishments on the House floor when Congress reconvenes.

The girls' odyssey began in the summer of 2003, when they met with Bradford to discuss possible projects for the annual National History Day competition. They stopped him after his first idea: telling the story of 21-year-old James Chaney, 20-year-old Andrew Goodman and 24-year-old Michael Schwerner.

The three young men were participating in Freedom Summer 1964, an effort to register blacks in the South to vote and start educational programs, when they were beaten and shot to death, allegedly by Klansmen. Their ages, not much older than the girls, struck a chord.

"We just thought something about those three men and their dedication to the movement really stood out," Saltiel said.

Although 19 men were eventually charged with federal civil rights violations in the case, Killen's arrest marks the first time Mississippi has sought murder charges.

The Lincolnshire students pored over thousands of pages of court transcripts and interviewed former prosecutors and investigators, witnesses, family members of the victims and government officials for their 10-minute documentary. They also sought out Killen for a phone interview.

Bradford decided to conduct the interview after a Justice Department official expressed concern about the girls having to testify in the future in case Killen said something incriminating.

Killen didn't implicate himself in the killings, Bradford said, but he did say the reason civil rights workers were so hated at the time was because people thought they were recruiting blacks to be communists.

Soon after that interview, Bradford said his and the girls' names were posted on a white

supremacist Web site that accused them of trying to skew the truth.

"I think it was truly a little startling to them to realize that there are still remnants of that archaic mind-set," Bradford said.

The students say the most rewarding part of their project was meeting with family members of the slain men, including Goodman's mother and Chaney's brother, who called them "superhero girls."